

You Hyeonkyeong: I retreat to the realm in a timeless horizon

Text | Juyeon Kang, GalleryJJ Director

"Pondering the value of time well spent and my pursuit of profundity... Would the retreat to Pian remain an unattainable dream or become reality." —Artist's Note, 2025

Against infinite time, life is but a fleeting moment. As Friedrich Hölderlin reflects on temporality, certain things endure even in the brief moments of hesitation. GalleryJJ is pleased to present *You Hyeonkyeong: I retreat to the realm in a timeless horizon*, featuring recent paintings by You Hyeonkyeong, who lives and works in Berlin and Seoul. Deeply committed to the essence of painting, she translates interior worlds and abstract emotions into work through everyday figures, dwellings, and landscapes. While her figurative work has long been a hallmark of her practice, this exhibition turns toward an expanded worldview through natural vistas as vessels for memory and place. At its heart is the new *Wilderness* series, stemming from her immersion in the cities, natural environments and cultural heritages across the globe. These works, alongside self-portraits, form a collection of fifteen paintings on display that addresses her pursuit of unconstrained time and space. You's timeless horizons suggest the possibility of discovering unknown territories that lie beyond our line of sight.

The vast terrains and horizons streak across the canvases on display break loose from the frame. With minimal elements—expansive voids, a select few palettes, and subtle variations in brush and pigment—her paintings summon visions of stark wilderness. As art critic Chung Youngmok pointed out in 2020, You's robust, concise brushwork strikes an abstract chord that melds into a cohesive whole. The surfaces, where void, entirety, and parts intermingle and resonate in organic unity, possess a magnetic pull that holds the viewer's gaze and sparks thoughts.

You's artistic practice forges a new path in relating the self to the world. Her work circles back to its source—the artist herself. Rather than merely appropriating surface appearances, she delves into her subjects head-on, teasing out their subtle inner shifts. Her approach deconstructs as opposed to building up form, transcending mere observation into expressive yet abstract surfaces that strip away the concrete.

The artist first made her mark with her distinctive early portraits—minimalist figures rendered with swift, unfettered brushwork and tellingly blank expressions, a focus that has remained central to her practice. Her trajectory took off with *Artist and Model* (2009, Woosuk Hall, Seoul National University), followed by shows at OCI Museum (2011) and Hakgojae Gallery (2012). Her series depicting ordinary male nudes and everyday subjects turned heads in the art world, stirring critical discourse. The scope broadened to capture the essence of familiar spaces—homes and well-trodden paths. Through exhibitions at Doosan Gallery New York (2016) and Space Mom Museum (2018), to her 2020 move to Berlin, up to her recent Yeosu Museum show (2024) featuring monumental abstract and text-based works, she has pushed her practice into new territory. Her creative force is evident in a staggering portfolio of over 1,000 works, speaking to both her prolific output and rich interpretive potential.

It's been five years since the artist's move to Berlin, where the foreign environment has naturally shaped her evolving practice. Nature now suffuses her canvases, and her once-raw emotional edge has mellowed, sometimes yielding refined, delicate lines amid bold brushwork. As a stranger in a strange land, she finds herself free to dive deep into

work, away from life's daily grind and social constraints, discovering inspiration in her walks through forests and along lakes. Soon, she turns her gaze to the surroundings, becoming aware of her own responses to this new world. This exhibition pushes these sensations from Berlin further, crystallizing into a profound will to live that plays out across barren, desolate terrains. The centerpiece *Wilderness* series transcends mere landscape—these are spaces where time itself seems to race across the plateau and merge with terrain. Their primordial untouched quality makes time almost tangible. *Pian* 彼岸—while meaning different things to different people—might be that future place we all retreat to that transcendental state. For her, it represents a deep-rooted space and time, breaking free from the shackles of convention. One might ask whether this embodies the tension between artistic freedom and the relentless demands of life.

I.

Titles such as *Destination to Meet Again* and *One Day* don't reference specific locations. Different locations often overlap, diverging from reality. She ponders over titles at length, often turning them into self-directed soliloquies. The *Destination to Meet Again* series recalls her favorable memories and atmosphere of Xi'an—the Giant Wild Goose Pagoda that caught her eye, and the leisurely ambiance, gray-washed city wall paths where past and present coexist. *To Shangri-La* takes its name from her visit to the utopia-tinged region, Shangri-La, in China's Yunnan Province. You thrives on stepping into uncharted places. She has touched down in numerous spots via residencies and studios—from Chungju, Goyang, and Sokcho to Zurich, New York, Argentina, and Germany—while branching out to Croatia, Italy, and China. Rather than focusing on the nuts and bolts of these places, she taps into thoughts and memories that gradually surface over time. What drives the rough, rapid brushwork, stains, and confident, raw gestural qualities in her works? What's behind that mysterious force traversing the canvas? Do these inner stirrings and their modes of outward expression stem from hidden desires and the unconscious? What draws her to paint the same place multiple times, as with the Pagoda?

Like the lover tracing shadows by lamplight in Pliny's tale, painting hinges on memory. As Derrida notes, representation springs from memory, not sight—from absence, not presence. This temporal dimension of memory comes alive in You's work. She believes that the landscape painted with the mind's eye can be just as beautiful as those before our open eyes. For her, subjects like figures and landscapes initiate painterly events. Just as with the painted abstract atmospheres engulfing figures, her works channel internally felt scenes rather than celebrating specific places or views. She holds out for unexpected intimate emotions to spill onto the canvas. Her work unfolds as a sensory expansion, tapping into temporality lurking beneath the place—like history itself—each painting serving as both mirror and unconscious self. As if facing a self-portrait, she confronts her own gaze, letting go of subject fixation to unleash new meanings. Even in the moment of applying brushstrokes, she turns things over in her mind. The rapid brushwork results not from immediate responses to subjects but from long internal observation and reflection, emerging from trained formal sensibilities where unconscious and conscious intersect. Through form, her hand often outpaces thought, chasing emotional threads woven through brush and color.

"Since it's not immediately visible, I wait... Time gathers slowly... Sinking into stillness, I see what lives within. The deeper I plunge, the more unfolds—that darkness where my entire world sinks, that solitude that surges... This descent into aching has, unknowingly, become my work." —Artist's Note, 2024

Contemplation unveils what the eye cannot see—peering into the abyss within reality's strata brings darkness, solitude, and pain. These elements hover in her paintings as both proof of existence and markers of natural forces and impulses

at work. Such are the visible and invisible powers that hold us in their grip. You questions and doubts, constantly negating and dismantling the world. As she puts it, *the same past is repeatedly revisited anew*—since what's passed always emerges differently in relation to the present, she comes to know herself through repetitive work that differs with each iteration. This remains an insatiable desire, perpetually deferred, often unfolding in a series of similar paintings. For the artist, painting is an ongoing process of discovering and confirming an inner self beyond conscious control or regulation.

Voids abound in You's work. Rather than filling the canvas with her embodied experience of the world and all that lies dormant within—to borrow from Deleuze—her paintings come closer to emptying. Through her distinctive approach that favors erasure and retention over addition, she delves into the gaps and absences within the world's linguistic order and institutions.

II.

You's distinctive approach traces back to her project in 2008—a portrait journey with a hundred male models recruited through open call. The very premise upended art history's conventional dynamics between female and male, subject and object. As a young female artist in her twenties, she channeled the inherent psychological tensions and subtle anxieties from the situation itself into her painterly process. *"The spontaneous emotions upon seeing the model and their resulting gestures," "laying bare the tensions of the painting process in each brushstroke"*—for her, portraiture became less about capturing likeness and more about documenting the impulses enabling each mark. This mindset continues to anchor her practice. When it comes to ventures that are dire and unpredictable, art makes it possible through its drive to push beyond limits and overcome the self.

The shifts in latent feelings remain intact on the canvas as brushstrokes, gestures, and traces of material, sparking varied emotional responses in viewers. The encounter itself takes precedence over relationships, yielding works that privilege action over representation. What begins as a release of energy—sensitivity, inner tension, deficiency, and forbidden desires—evolves into self-exploration through patient introspection and the passage of time in flux.

You's focus now expands to fundamental questions about life and art, the depth of time, and worldly origins. Departing from current wontedness, she envisions another retreat in time and space. Her conception of freedom and time may align with philosopher's *country path*, the time for prolonged dwelling and slowness. Or it echoes the life of *scholé*, liberation from need, labor, and unease. Perhaps this yearning for the retreat had taken place even before her move to Berlin, perpetually retreating at approach, cycling through as hope and desire. This undoubtedly drives her life and artistic practice. Through these *time-implied landscapes*, the exhibition sheds light on You's journey from her early portraits to her time in Berlin, marking a new chapter.

"A place with no expectations... I've longed to move somewhere more liberating, away from a life lived up to expectations. I wanted to live where I need not meet these expectations, where thoughts could roam free from institution, and I think those elements appeared to me as wilderness, barren lands, scenery, and nature." —Artist's

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